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Fokken, Margriet

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## Beyond stereotypes

*Understanding the identities of Hindustani women and girls in Suriname between 1873 and 1921*

Margriet Fokken

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### Abstract

The sources available on Hindustani women and girls in Suriname were rarely produced by the women and girls themselves, but for or by British or Dutch colonial officers, European travel writers, Christian missionaries, and in some cases, by Hindustani men. In these sources, women and girls primarily figure in stereotypical roles as ‘prostitutes’, ‘unfaithful wives’, or ‘female slaves’. This article sheds light on the ways in which Hindustani women and girls positioned themselves in relation to these stereotyped identities. Records produced by the Dutch colonial government are read both along and against the grain in order to identify contradictions, interruptions, and meaningful silences. The risk of reproducing stereotypes is thus reduced and alternative interpretations of women’s acts and views are highlighted. It is argued that the historiography on Hindustani women in Suriname, as well as the wider historiography on Indo-Caribbean women, can and should use this methodology to move away from a focus on the ‘reality’ of these stereotypes towards an analysis of the active involvement of Hindustani women in the construction of family and community. It is shown how forms of coexistence between men and women, concepts of family, and financial responsibility were shaped by the norms of marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family that were imposed, but also adapted and used by women to achieve their personal ends.

**Keywords:** agency, voice, women, girls, Hindustani, Indian, Suriname, indenture, Indo-Caribbean

Portrayals of Hindustani indentured women, who were brought in from present day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar between 1873 and 1916 to work as indentured labourers on the Suriname plantations, are often stereotyped descriptions. For example, A.H. Pareau, who published a travel narrative on the journey he had undertaken to Suriname in 1897, described the Hindustani families he encountered in Paramaribo with the following words:

When we see such a coolie family approaching, we would see papa walk in front with a stick or umbrella in his hand and maybe a small boy by his side. The wife never walks next to him, she always follows modestly some paces behind, to make it clear, that she is not his equal but his slave – his property I would almost say.<sup>1</sup>

Pareau also commented on the supposedly violent nature of Hindustani men. He stated: 'They are short-tempered and vindictive by nature. Not a year goes by in which not more than one murder is recorded, usually committed by a coolie, who killed his wife, because she had gone to another man, who did not pay for her to her legal husband.'<sup>2</sup> The images of the female 'slave' and the 'unfaithful wife and violent husband' are stereotypes that were also employed to explain the acts and views of Indian immigrants in the British Caribbean colonies of British Guiana and Trinidad, as Prabhu P. Mohapatra (1995, p. 233) shows. Pareau, like many British observers in British Guiana and Trinidad, interpreted the views and acts of Hindustani men and women solely in the light of their cultural background and the psychological mindset that was supposedly bound up with their race and gender. These stereotypical depictions employed by most Dutch and other European observers of Suriname society make it difficult to explore the points of view of Hindustani women and girls.

However, as shown by historians working on the contexts of British Guiana (Bahadur, 2013), Trinidad (Reddock, 1985, 1994, 2008; Mohammed, 1994, 2002; Hosein, 2007), and Jamaica (Shepherd, 1995, 2002), it is possible to uncover some of the ways in which these women and girls positioned themselves. In this article, I analyse how Hindustani women and girls positioned themselves vis-à-vis identities ascribed to them and how they themselves gave meaning to their everyday lives in Suriname between 1873 and 1921. This is the period from the start of immigration until the last arrivals completed their five-year contracts. Approximately 28-31 percent of the more than 34,000 Hindustani migrants who were brought to Suriname were female (Hoeft, 1998, p. 107). Most of these women could

neither read nor write. None of the textual sources that provide insight into the lives of Hindustani women in Suriname were written by the women themselves. They were written by Dutch colonial officials, British observers, or Moravian missionaries. The single existing autobiography written by an indentured labourer in Suriname was written by a man, and women hardly feature in it (Khan, 2005).

As a result of the absence of female 'voices', the historiography on Hindustani women in Suriname remains informed by stereotypical depictions. Debate on the emigration of Hindustani women in Suriname has largely focused on the question of whether or not it constituted a vehicle for female emancipation (Emmer, 1985, 1987), or brought increased subordination (Hoeft, 1987a, 1987b). In my view, neither of these characterisations do justice to the lived experiences of these women. As Kim N. Johnson (1984, pp. 14-15) and Patricia Mohammed (2002, pp. 200-202) argue with regard to Trinidad, it is not possible to define 'the position' of these women, since they were negotiating their position on multiple levels, in relation to family, the immigrant community, *and* society at large. I thus do not intend to determine whether women were victims or resisters of colonial or patriarchal control, but to look at how they positioned themselves in different contexts and how factors such as gender, race, class, culture, age, and religion all played their part. Furthermore, the articles written by P.C. Emmer in the 1980s are largely based on statistics taken from the Colonial Reports. Hoeft (1987a, 1987b) argues that these sources were insufficient and advocated the analysis of personal perspectives. However, as historian Tanya Sitaram (2013, p. 2) points out, Hoeft primarily found the personal perspectives of Javanese women and based many of her findings relating to Hindustani women on research into other colonies. Sitaram has shown that there is source material available (e.g. in the archive of the immigration agent) that provides insight into women's views and decisions (pp. 11-14).

The literature on Indo-Caribbean women in Trinidad and British Guiana is much more voluminous and has provided clues for filling the gaps in knowledge of the Suriname case. In an important recent study on Indian indentured women, Gaiutra Bahadur (2013) analyses the experiences of emigrant women going to Trinidad, British Guiana, and Suriname, and in some cases to places such as Natal or Fiji, without substantially reflecting on the differences in context. I think it is important to consider how differences between Dutch and British colonial policies affected the lives of Hindustani women and girls.

The literature on Indian women in Trinidad and British Guiana repeat-

edly points out that stereotypical depictions do not necessarily reflect the lived experiences and views of the women involved (see Mohapatra, 1995, p. 260; Mohammed, 2002, p. 179). However, after approximately three decades of scholarship, the questions asked by researchers often still relate to these stereotypes (Bahadur, 2013, pp. 103-129). The need to move beyond stereotypes therefore is and remains of critical importance. In this article, textual sources are read both along and against the grain in order to identify contradictions, interruptions, and meaningful silences that provide insight into the views of Hindustani women. Reflecting on the possibility of recovering female voices and the female point of view, the literary critic and theorist Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (1988) has argued that this is virtually impossible. Spivak has made researchers aware of the problematics of analysing sources produced in a colonial context. Her intervention constituted a severe critique of the possibility for applying, in the case of women, the 'against the grain' analysis that members of the Subaltern Studies Group were propagating. This methodology was geared to locating first-person narratives of colonised people and observational data about them (Guha, 1994 [1983]), but also to finding contradictions or meaningful silences in the archival record, which could be interpreted by contrasting them with views expressed by the colonised in oral histories and personal documents, such as diaries, notes, or letters (Ludden, 2001, pp. 4-5).

In response to Spivak, historians and literary scholars have argued that, although a full recovery of the female point of view might be impossible, it is possible to find fractured evidence with which the colonial master narrative can be disrupted (Mani, 1998; Joseph, 2004; Chaudhuri, Katz, & Perry, 2010). In order to fruitfully apply the against-the-grain reading of texts produced by the Dutch colonial government in the Dutch Indies, anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2009) has urged researchers to read these documents 'along the grain' first. Stoler has made a convincing case for the need to understand colonial epistemological practices and sentiments. She argues for a move from 'archive as source to archive-as-subject' in order to understand the working of colonial common sense and the affective dispositions underlying the production of archival material (pp. 45, 47-50). Employing both the along-the-grain and the against-the-grain methodology reduces the risk of reproducing stereotypes and highlights the alternative interpretations of women's acts and views.

In this article, textual sources are read along the grain in order to reconstruct how the images of the Hindustani migrant woman as promiscuous and untrustworthy developed in different stages of migration. The ways in which these assumptions affected the lives of the women involved

are highlighted and, by reading against the grain, alternative interpretations are indicated. First, reports on emigration from British India are analysed to show how emigrant women saw their agency circumscribed by being labelled as 'unreliable' and 'potential prostitutes'. In the next section, colonial reports and legislation are read along the grain to show how stereotypical imagery developed after arrival at the Suriname plantations and fuelled the imposition of norms of marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family. In the final section, I focus on the self-positioning of Hindustani women. The effects of stereotypical imagery on women's lives are indicated, while sources that disrupt the stereotypical imagery and provide alternative paths of interpretation are investigated.

## Emigration as a gendered taboo

In order to understand how stereotypes developed, it is important to first examine how Hindustani women recruits destined for Suriname were described by British, Dutch, and Indian recruitment officials. Recruitment for the migration of indentured labourers to plantation societies in the Caribbean, Fiji, and Natal began in the decades after the formal abolition of slavery in the British colonies in 1834 (Tinker, 1974, pp. 61-115). This system of recruitment and emigration had already been in place for several decades when the Dutch began to participate in 1873. Migrants for Suriname were recruited in present-day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. They were subsequently transported to Calcutta (now Kolkata), where the Dutch emigration agency was located. The Indian Emigration Act of 1871, which was designed to regulate emigration, stipulated that at least forty women to every hundred men should be recruited, but, in practice, this requirement was rarely met (BL, IOR, V/24/1209, Annual Report 1878-1879, p. 1; BL, IOR, V/24/1209, Annual Report 1879-1880, p. 2; BL, IOR, V/24/1209, Annual Report 1880-1881, pp. 1-2). While seasonal migration was a common phenomenon in the regions of recruitment, overseas migration was taboo. As historian Samita Sen (1999, pp. 7, 9) has shown, according to Hindu and Muslim middle class views, it was unacceptable for respectable men and women to leave their families. This was even more true for women than for men, since women were supposed to be guardians of the family's respectability.

The Dutch colonial authorities in Suriname preferred to receive male recruits – whom they regarded as better suited for manual labour – and held particular views on the 'kind' of women they wanted. The Emigration

Agent for Suriname, Van Cutsem, stated in 1877 that he had rejected: '... a batch of dancing-girls and women of a similar description, with their male attendants. These people laughed at the idea of labouring as agriculturalists' (BL, IOR, V/24/1209, Annual report 1877-1878, p. 10). Furthermore, the recruiter Sumer Singh, who recruited for the Suriname agency in the city of Gaya, told the British official G.A. Grierson that he never recruited 'bazar women' (Grierson, 1883, Diary, p. 52). The term 'bazar women' referred to women whom supposedly worked as 'prostitutes' and were seen as sources of disease and immorality by the British colonial authorities and Hindu and Muslim middle classes alike (Wald, 2009, pp. 13, 22-23; Levine, 1994, pp. 587-588, 591; Gupta, 2001, pp. 109-113).

Emigration was thus constructed as something that respectable women would never take part in and those women and girls that did were regarded with suspicion. From 1879, magistrates working in the Northwestern Provinces and Oudh were instructed to ascertain whether the potential husbands of single female recruits were still alive and to find out whether they objected to the women's emigration (BL, IOR, V/24/1209, Annual report 1879-1880, p. 2). The Protector of Emigrants, who was based in Calcutta and was responsible for overseeing the process of emigration, noted in his annual report on the same year that it was very difficult to find out whether female recruits were actually married. He stated:

... the class of women willing to emigrate consists principally of young widows and married or single women who have already gone astray, and are therefore not only most anxious to avoid their homes and to conceal their antecedents, but are also at the same time the least likely to be received back into their families. (BL, IOR, V/24/1209, Annual report 1879-1880, p. 3)

Women were thus disbelieved and saw their agency circumscribed. While potential husbands had to give consent for their emigration, male recruits did not have to seek their wives' permission to go overseas.

In the sources, female recruits are thus portrayed primarily as social outcasts who were not to be trusted. In order to understand why these women were portrayed in this way, the 'common sense' and 'dispositions' (Stoler, 2009, p. 38) that informed British and Dutch colonial officials need to be taken into account. The British colonial authorities were afraid that emigration would be condemned by the Hindu and Muslim middle classes (Lal, 1985, pp. 55-56) or anti-indenture forces in the metropolis (Tinker, 1974, p. 236). Unwelcome questions and criticism relating to the recruitment and treatment of female recruits could be averted by casting doubt

on their reputation. Through legislative measures, the British and Dutch authorities tried to show that women were protected against abduction or maltreatment. Moreover, they felt they needed to recognise the authority of husbands over their wives. The Dutch and British colonial authorities thus reinforced patriarchal control over emigrant women in order to avoid emigration being scandalised.

Were there women who used the system of recruitment towards their own ends? Grierson interviewed a recruiter in Baksar, who told him:

A woman (the recruiter says) came to him starving and almost naked; he fed her for a month, and gave her clothes. When taken to the Magistrate to be registered, she not only refused to emigrate, but went off triumphantly with the clothes the recruiter had given her, in spite of the latter's appeals to the Magistrate. (Grierson, 1883, p. 8)

There are other examples of women who refused to emigrate and took matters into their own hands, such as Golab, who was already aboard a ship bound for Suriname but convinced the captain and the surgeon superintendent to let her return (Colonial report of 1885 [on 1884], Annex F., p. 3). These disruptions were unwelcome and both women were blamed for acting dishonestly. Their acts of self-determination were interpreted in the light of the discourse of 'untrustworthy' and 'promiscuous' women, thus marking their agency as illegitimate.

## The imagery of unfaithful wives and violent husbands?

After showing how stereotypes developed in British India, I will now address the question of how stereotypical imagery of Hindustani women continued in Suriname. Slavery had been formally abolished in Suriname in 1863, but the formerly enslaved were obliged to continue working on the plantations until 1873. After this period, it was thought that the Afro-Surinamese residents would no longer be willing to work or would demand higher wages, while some plantation owners argued that their work performance would be inadequate. The immigration of Hindustani indentured labourers was seen by the Dutch colonial elite as a solution to maintain the profitability of the plantations. In the contract signed by the recruit before embarkation on a ship to Suriname, it was stipulated that he or she would work at a plantation for five years, six days a week, for seven to ten hours a day. When the demands of the contract were not met, this



could be enforced through a penal sanction (*Speciale wetgeving*, 1899, pp. 60-62). There were three different categories of workers: 'first-class' labourers ('able-bodied' men of at least 16 years of age), 'second-class' labourers (adult men who were 'not able-bodied', boys between 10 and 15 years of age, and all women aged 10 years and above), and 'third-class' labourers (children under 10 years of age). Maximum wages were set for first-class and second-class labourers, who could never earn more than sixty or forty cents per day respectively (*Speciale wetgeving*, 1899, after p. 67). Thus, while the migrants were all indentured labourers, or *kantraki* as the immigrants themselves called it, differentiation based on gender, age, and supposed physical ability determined how much money they could earn.

Mohapatra (1995, pp. 258-259) has shown how British colonial officials tried to 'reform' and 'restore' family and marriage among Indian indentured labourers in British Guiana from the 1880s onwards. The imagery of unfaithful wives and jealous husbands was central to these attempts. Violence towards women that took place on the plantations was blamed on the sense of loss of control that indentured men experienced. Did Dutch colonial authorities employ the imagery of unfaithful wives and jealous husbands in a similar fashion? According to the Colonial Report on 1888, '[C]ases of physical abuse of [Hindustani] women are common' (Annex J., p. 13).<sup>3</sup> The report went on to describe in detail several cases of violence of Hindustani men towards women. Only 'the worst cases' (ibid.)<sup>4</sup> were mentioned in the report, the first of which happened at the *Nieuw-Clarenbeek* plantation. An immigrant called Chlinkowree (sic), who was involved in an illicit relationship with a woman named Kopoak (sic), attacked her with a cutlass, according to the report, in a burst of jealousy. The woman survived the attack, but was no longer able to work. A second case described the attack on and the rape of a young Hindustani woman by two Hindustani men. The woman had come out of her house when the men, armed with bats, attacked her, stole all her jewellery, forced her to the ground, raped her, and beat her. The men were sentenced to five years of forced labour for this (ibid.).

The reasons for or causes of violence of Hindustani men towards Hindustani women were debated by Emmer and Hoeft in the 1980s. On the one hand, Emmer (1987, pp. 116-117) emphasised the fact that acts of violence by men towards women were common in British India as well, and highlighted the continuity of such acts after indenture. On the other hand, Hoeft (1987a, p. 64) connected these acts to a sense of 'loss of control' experienced by the men, which was closely tied up with emigration and

the living conditions on the plantations. Neither Hoeffte nor Emmer provided a detailed analysis of the descriptions of violence included in the Colonial Reports. However, I think it is necessary to read the Colonial Report on 1888 along the grain, to look into the details of these descriptions, ask why these acts were written about at all, and to determine to what extent these descriptions resemble those found in Trinidad and British Guiana, before drawing any conclusions from them.

It must be emphasised that the explicit description of violence in the report was at odds with the general matter-of-fact style of the rest of the report, which was filled with enumerations and statistics. The purpose of writing about these incidents was to justify Dutch views of Hindustani immigrants as people who were in need of reform and thus condemning the immigrants for their violent and immoral behaviour. On careful reading of the statements in the Colonial Report on 1888, it becomes clear that the violence was perpetrated not only by husbands, but also by lovers or single men who were unable to find a partner. While Kopoak was involved with another man, no such statements were made about the woman who was raped. The imagery of 'unfaithful wives and jealous husbands' employed by colonial officials in British Guiana and Trinidad to explain attacks by immigrant Indian men on Indian women, as Mohapatra described (1995, p. 233), was not used consistently by Dutch colonial officials in Suriname. Furthermore, unlike the British, they did not keep a record of the numbers of women who were murdered (Mohapatra, 1995, pp. 231-232). It is not possible to determine whether this was because the colonial authorities were not interested in the violence taking place outside the plantations, or because it actually happened more frequently among indentured labourers than among ex-indentured residents.

In the first decades of immigration, Dutch colonial officials were less concerned with regulating Hindustani marriages in Suriname. The British consul stationed in Paramaribo did press for the introduction of a 'Heathen Marriage Act' in 1890, but did not succeed in having it implemented (BL, IOR, L/PJ/6/276, file 768). From 1907 onwards, migrants were offered the chance to register their marriages officially upon arrival in Paramaribo (G.B. 1908, no 2), but Hindu and Muslim marriages between residents of the colony were not only legalised until 1940 (Ramsodh, 1990, p. 131). However, this does not mean that marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family were not propagated through other forms of legislation. The contract – which was formulated by British officials and had been part of the deal between the Dutch and British governments in 1872 – stipulated that the labourers were to be provided with housing at the plantations. As

Hoefte (1998, p. 137) shows, these provisions were actually used by the plantation management to control the immigrants' everyday lives as well.

For example, it was stipulated in the legislation that in the barracks where the indentured labourers were supposed to live at the plantation, '... [a] man, woman and children, below fifteen years of age, to be housed in one room...' (*Speciale wetgeving*, 1899, p. 53).<sup>5</sup> Rahman Khan wrote that, when he arrived at *Lust en Rust*, the following happened:

We were five men and a woman who was without a husband. Seeing this, the manager asked the lady who her husband was. I do not know what happened to this bitch but she alleged that I was her husband. (Maybe she found me more youthful and handsome than the others). I was stunned and immediately refuted her allegation. But despite all my pleadings, the manager refused to heed to my clarifications and warned me of dire consequences if I refused to lodge with the woman. (Khan, 2005, p. 91)

The ideal of a man and a woman living together was thus practically enforced by the plantation management in the case of Khan. Why? The view that Hindustani women were immoral was widespread in Suriname as well and by actively managing the living arrangement, the plantation management could make sure that all women had partners who could control them. The nuclear family as the ideal family and Western European Christian norms of marriage and monogamy were actively propagated by missionaries and medical professionals with regard to Afro-Surinamese residents, as J.R.H. Terborg (2002, pp. 51-62) shows.

Despite the fact that the Dutch colonial government was less committed to drawing up new laws to regulate Hindu and Muslim marriages, Hindustani immigrants were faced with norms of marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family, since these informed both the indenture contract and the ad hoc decision-making by plantation managers. Dutch colonial policy relating to the immigrants was guided by British examples, because continuation of immigration depended on their approval. But, Dutch immigration authorities did not necessarily have the same concerns as Trinidadian or British Guianese officials. In the decades when the 'colonial project of "restoration" of family among Indian indentured labourers in the British Caribbean' (Mohapatra, 1995, p. 228) were taking shape, Dutch colonial officials in Suriname were primarily engaged in establishing immigration and indenture as the 'respectable' new pillars of the plantation system. Their primary concern was to comply with the provisions of the contract, which required them to provide housing and medical treatment

according to standards determined by the British (Hoefte, 1998, p. 42; Bhagwanbali, 2010, pp. 122-133). In their explanations of violence towards women, they again resorted to the imagery of 'the loose woman' used by emigration authorities and recruiters in British India in the form of the 'unfaithful wife'.

## Beyond the images

Having come to an understanding of the common sense that informed the representation of Dutch observers, let us return to the issue of self-positioning. How did the stereotypical imagery affect Hindustani women's self-positioning? In other words, how did they accept, adapt, or reject identities ascribed to them?

The statements quoted above on women recruits need to be read against the grain, taking into account that the taboo on emigration was something recruits were aware of. The single women and girls who were recruited were leaving behind their families and defying the taboo. When the Protector of Emigrants stated that women were reluctant to talk about their 'antecedents', this indicates they were aware of the prejudices against them. They were in the process of creating new lives for themselves. The chances of returning to India after indenture and being accepted into their family or community again were much smaller for women. The stigma of emigration was accepted by these women and girls in the hope of a better future.

The living conditions during recruitment and under indenture in terms of surveillance and formal registration, but also in relation to housing and income, were informed by the notion that Hindustani migrant women should be transformed from untrustworthy and immoral into faithful married wives. In explaining how Indian women in Trinidad and British Guiana dealt with marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family, Mohapatra (1995, p. 244) points out that immigrants did not have a preferred form of coexistence, but engaged in different types of relationships. This was also the case in Suriname, where – as the records in the Immigration Agent's archive show – women sometimes had relationships with two men (NAS, AG). In 1916, for example, Basdeo reported Mathura to the police for wanting to kill him. In the ensuing investigation, Hansi, who had arrived with her husband Mathura and Basdeo on the same ship in 1907 (NAS, AG 1039, 27 January 1916, no 84/V), declared in a first-person statement: 'I lived with BASDEO for four years. I have not been involved with BASDEO for two

years and I do not want to be involved with him either. I do not know if my two children are his or my husband MATHURA's because both came to me' (NAS, AG 1039, 27 January 1916, no. 84/V).<sup>6</sup> While Hansi eventually did choose to have a monogamous relationship with her husband, monogamy and the nuclear family were not the norms in her life.

However, these norms would continue not only to inform the way in which plantation management acted and immigration legislation was shaped, but also to determine the possibilities women had in the post-indenture context. When the five-year contract ended, the *ex-kantraki* had the choice to re-indenture, to make use of a free return passage to Calcutta, or obtain a plot of land in Suriname. Until 1895, it was possible to obtain land free of charge as part of a government settlement scheme, when the right to a free return passage was relinquished. From 1895 onwards, it became possible to take part in this scheme while retaining this right, or receive one hundred guilders in return for giving up the return passage (*Speciale wetgeving*, 1899, pp. 191-195). The size of the plots available through the settlement scheme were limited to between  $\frac{3}{4}$  and 3 hectares (or 2 to 7.4 acres) (Benjamins and Snelleman, 1914-1917, p. 441). The small size of the plot was supposed to ensure that a member of the family remained available for work on the plantation. The nuclear family as the standard size of family and the ideal of the male breadwinner informed the Dutch colonial government's decision to keep the plots small. Wages for male labourers at the plantation were higher, and it would therefore make sense for the wife to stay at home and tend the crops, livestock, and children.

Some could buy land more easily than others. Under indenture, men had the opportunity to earn more money and it were the high-caste adult men who could be appointed as headmen, and they were also the ones who claimed positions as religious leaders. After indenture, they were the ones who were in the best position in terms of the financial and social capital they had accrued. Dutch colonial officials did not publish any systematic analysis of the amounts or types of land allocated to Hindustani migrants. However, the 1900 to 1902 lists of migrants included those who bought land for one hundred guilders or more (Colonial reports of 1901 [on 1900], Annex C, pp. 100-101; Colonial Report of 1902 [on 1901], Annex M1, pp. 91-94; Colonial Report of 1903 [on 1902], Annex M1, pp. 77-81). The majority of the people listed were men, but, interestingly, the person investing the largest amount of money was a woman named Busso. In 1900, Busso and her son spent 2600 guilders to obtain three plots at Paramaribo (Colonial Report of 1901 [on 1900], Annex C, p. 100).

Land ownership could be an important source of independence for women, as Shaheeda Hosein (2007, p. 2) shows for Trinidad. The case of Soomaria, who owned land at *Hecht en Sterk*, demonstrates how landownership could also provide autonomy and bargaining power in Suriname. The District Commissioner (hereafter DC) of Cottica and Beneden-Comewijne reported on this case to the Immigration Agent when a disagreement arose about the ownership of a number of cows in 1910. Soomaria had been legally married to Elahabux and inherited his plot when he died, in addition to the adjacent plot that was already in her possession. Chitun became her new partner and one plot eventually became his. The DC became involved when Chitun claimed ownership of her cows and Soomaria refused to comply. Soomaria told the DC that one hut belonged to Chitun, but that she was the owner of the house made out of planking and another hut. Chitun had to back down and admit that only the hut belonged to him (NAS, AG 58, 12 May 1910, no 893). With Soomaria living in the superior house and in possession of cows and land, it seems that Chitun was dependent on her instead of the other way around. Chitun seems to have expected the authorities to support him, but had to conclude that Soomaria was aware of her rights.

Like many of the sources used from the archive of the Immigration Agent, the case of Soomaria and Chitun is a record of a dispute. I agree with Mohammed when she argues that it is important not to see gender relations and gendered identities only in the light of 'a struggle of one sex to gain ascendancy over the other when the circumstances permit' (2002, p. 265). Further research should therefore be done into the ways in which Hindustani men and women in Suriname cooperated in the constitution of their community. As I have shown here, it is possible to tell a more complex story about Hindustani women's self-positioning by contrasting and comparing different types of source material, such as official reports presented to the Dutch parliament and the internal correspondence of the Immigration Department.

## Concluding remarks

The label of immorality that was attached to Hindustani migrant women the moment they were recruited would continue to inform the way in which they were seen by Dutch observers in Suriname. Deployed in various stereotypical guises, it was used to divert attention from the problems caused by emigration, indenture, and plantation life. Whereas, in the first

decades of immigration, the Dutch were less engaged with regulating Hindu and Muslim marriages compared to their British counterparts in Trinidad and British Guiana, the same norms of marriage, monogamy, and the nuclear family were in vogue. This article shows that Hindustani women could not simply shake off the prism of suspicion through which they were viewed by colonial observers. Women could become dependent on their male partners due to the living arrangements on the plantation, the uneven wage distribution, and the limited amounts of land granted through the settlement scheme. However, Hindustani women in Suriname did not always live their lives according to these norms as the cases of Hansi, Busso, Soomaria, and the woman who lived with Rahman Khan show. By earning an independent income, Busso and her son were able to obtain land, and Soomaria realised that property ownership enhanced her independence. Others, like Hansi and the woman claiming Khan as her 'husband', used the norms of marriage and monogamy to get their preferred partner. These four cases cannot be considered as representative of all Hindustani women. Women were affected differently by the pressures placed upon them to live the lives thought out for them by the Dutch colonial authorities. These examples suggest that it was certainly much more likely for women of some means who had knowledge of the law to move away from the prefigured paths set out for them.

The process of examining different types of source material, reading these along and against the grain, and gathering the fragments that provide insight into Hindustani women's views is a challenging project. Stoler encourages historians to gain insight into how affective bonds and dispositions influenced what was recorded and how it was recorded. However, this is hard to accomplish when one is engaged in a project in which the aim is to read sources against the grain. In order to go beyond stereotypes, it is important to include a greater diversity of sources, which all need to be contextualised. However, for the historiography on Suriname to move beyond the terms of emancipation versus subordination, this methodology is very useful. Adding the fragments that contradict, disrupt, or challenge stereotypical imagery in historical analysis makes it possible to gain insight into how women were affected by the imagery and to move towards answering the question of how Hindustani women participated in the construction of family and community.



## Notes

1. 'Wanneer we zoo'n koelifamilie hadden zien aankomen, dan zouden wij papa hebben zien vooruitloopen met een stok of parapluie in zijne hand en misschien een klein ventje naast zich. De vrouw gaat nimmer met hem op eene lijn, zij volgt steeds gedwee enkele passen achteraan, om duidelijk te doen uitkomen, dat zij niet is zijns gelijke maar zijne slavin, haast zou ik zeggen zijn koopwaar.' Pareau, *Onze West*, p. 42.
2. 'Zij zijn opvliegend en wraakzuchtig van aard. Geen jaar gaat er voorbij waarin niet meer dan één moord moet worden geboekstaafd, meestal gepleegd door een koelie, die zijne vrouw doodt, omdat zij is overgegaan aan een anderen man, die niets voor haar betaalde aan de wettige echtgenoot.' Pareau, *Onze West*, p. 247.
3. 'Ook gevallen van vrouwen mishandeling komen dikwijls voor.'
4. 'De ergste'
5. '... man, vrouw en kinderen, beneden 15 jaar oud, in één vertrek zijn gehuisvest...'
6. 'Ik heb met BASDEO gedurende vier jaren geleefd. Sedert twee jaren heb ik niet meer met BASDEO te doen gehad en wil ik ook niet meer met hem te doen hebben. Ik weet niet of myne twee kinderen van hem zyn of van myn man MATHURA want beiden kwamen by my.'

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## About the author

**Margriet Fokken** is a PhD candidate in modern history at the University of Groningen. Her project concerns identity and community formation among Hindustani immigrants in Suriname between 1873 and 1921. Together with Maaïke Derksen, she organised the workshop 'Locating voices of marginalized "others". Strategies for engaging textual, visual and material sources', held at Radboud University on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, 2014. She was affiliate member at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine in Trinidad in 2012 and 2014. She has been an editor of this journal since 2014. E-mail: [m.fokken@rug.nl](mailto:m.fokken@rug.nl)

